the few

Ecthelion²
2013

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v 2.0

Ecthelion²

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A revised version of a game originally submitted to "RPG Kitchen 2012," a Czech mutation of the Game-Chef design contest *(www.rpgforum.cz)*

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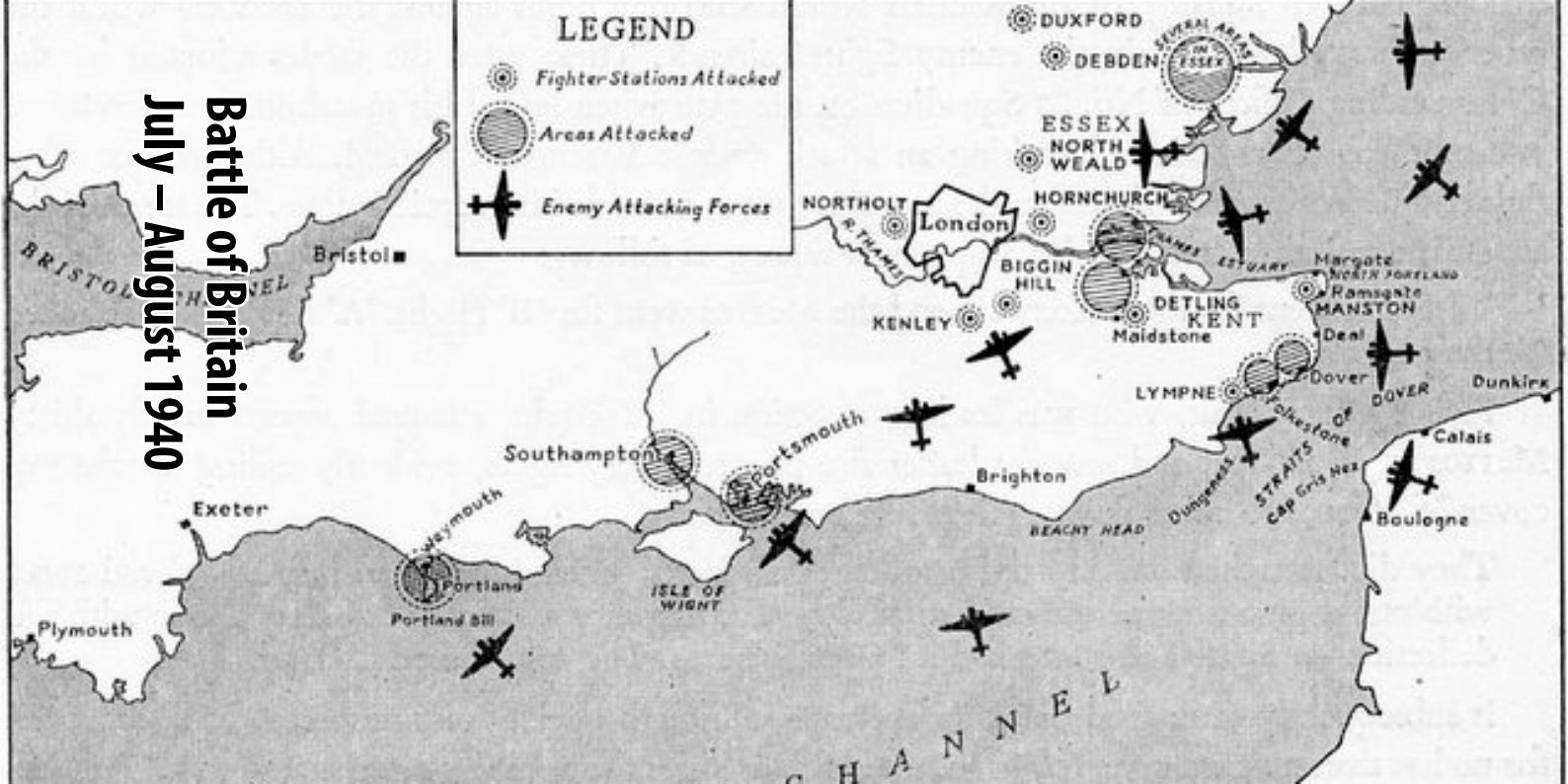
Dedicated to the memory of all foreign pilots who fought in the ranks of the Royal Air Force during the Battle of Britain.



Battle of Britain
July – August 1940

What General Weygand called the battle of France is over. I expect that the battle of Britain is about to begin. Upon this battle depends the survival of Christian civilization. Upon it depends our own British life, and the long continuity of our institutions and our Empire. The whole fury and might of the enemy must very soon be turned on us. Hitler knows that he will have to break us in this Island or lose the war. If we can stand up to him, all Europe may be free and the life of the world may move forward into broad, sunlit uplands.

But if we fail, then the whole world, including the United States, including all that we have known and cared for, will sink into the abyss of a new Dark Age made more sinister, and perhaps more protracted, by the lights of perverted science. Let us therefore brace ourselves to our duties, and so bear ourselves that if the British Empire and its Commonwealth last for a thousand years, men will still say, 'This was their finest hour.'

Winston Churchill, 18 July 1940

1.

the game

It is the year 1940. Hitler's Nazi hordes have overrun Europe, torn Czechoslovakia asunder, split Poland with the Bolsheviks and, with the speed of a lightning, crushed France along with the British expeditionary force. After having evacuated Dunkirk, the Great Britain now stands alone in its fight against the monstrous regime. On the shores of northern France, Germans are already amassing vast armies and starting preparations for a sea invasion of England.

The pilots of the Royal Air Force fight valiantly to defend English cities and to achieve the air superiority. They face the yet to be defeated might of the Nazi war machine. If they fail, the proud Albion will crumble. The famous Battle of Britain begins. Only a few of the pilots will survive to see its end, for the losses in the ranks of young pilots are astounding.

This is a game for 2–6 players, one of them taking the role of a Game Master, or GM. Unlike other players, the GM does not control a character of their own. Instead he creates a story for the others and plays the parts of supporting characters or German pilots during the dogfights. Each of the remaining players acts as a brave pilot of the RAF.

At the beginning all players except the GM create their characters whom they will guide through battles. The game itself then continues in two constantly alternating sequences – the **Mission** (where the pilots in their Spitfires duke it out against the enemy), and the **Base** (where the pilots recuperate, experience everyday human woes or petty pleasures, and try to cope with the horrors of war).

What Do You Need to Play?

You will need **a couple of sheets of paper** and some **pencils** for players to mark down notes and write their farewell letters. Try to procure one or more heaps of **three six-sided dice** (ideally three dice for each player – if you have lass then that, there will be some dice shuffling along the table) which will be used to resolve situations in the game. You will also need **two types of tokens** (one to represent altitude and one for retreat) – it doesn't really matter whether you use poker chips, coins, cut pieces of paper. Any two different kinds of items will do the trick.

Finally, each player should have a **pawn**, a playing piece to represent their pilot. The GM has more pawns to represent enemy aircraft. The pawns will be moved along the table to show how the situation develops during the missions, so that players have a clear idea of what's going on in the skies.

The Pilot

The gratitude of every home in our Island, in our Empire, and indeed throughout the world, except in the abodes of the guilty, goes out to the British airmen who, undaunted by odds, unwearied in their constant challenge and mortal danger, are turning the tide of the world war by their prowess and by their devotion. Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few.

Winston Churchill, 20 August 1940

Let the players come up with the idea of their pilot. Is he a native Englishman, a ginger-haired Scot, a sun-tanned Australian or perhaps one of the pilots hailing from the occupied continent (Polish, Czechoslovakian, Belgian, Dutch?). What is his motivation? Why has he joined the RAF? Is he simply a conscript or did he enlist voluntarily after someone in his family died in the war? Players should also have at least a vague notion about the personality of their pilot – it will develop during play in more detail.

Characters are described by four **skills** in terms of mechanics. The first two apply to missions, the other two are used while at the base.

Shooting – It is used for shooting enemy aircrafts in dogfights. This skill represents how accurate the pilot is when shooting and adjusting aim, and whether he can hit the enemy where it counts.

Piloting – Decides how well a pilot can steer his aircraft, perform acrobatic shenanigans, manoeuvre and simply fly.

Personality – Represents the strength of the pilot's personality, his eloquence and generally his chances outside a cockpit.

Soldiering – Measures how good the pilot is when it comes to military matters. It is not only shooting, fighting or avoiding capture, but also covers all military administration, writing reports, being savvy in an army environment, commanding soldiers at the base, knowledge of protocol, tactics etc.

Players distribute the values 3, 2, 2, 1 in between these skills however they choose to. The skills can later be improved by winning in aerial combat (see the Campaign section).

One of the pilots will be a commander of the group, bearing the rank of a Flight Sergeant. Decide who it will be by making Soldiering rolls (see the Resolution section below). The player with the highest roll takes the command and gets one more skill point to invest in their starting skills. Other pilots start the game with the rank of a Sergeant.

The Farewell Letter

After the first mission, players start writing their farewell letters for their beloved – a girlfriend, wife, parents, children, friends.... After each mission the pilot survives, the player will add a new paragraph or a couple of sentences. When the pilot dies, the player gets a moment to add a sentence or two to finish up their letter, and finally sign it. As soon as other pilots return to the base, the player reads their pilot's farewell letter, written to his girlfriend, family or friends just before the mission from which he never returned...

Some examples:

> Dearest Ashley,
>
> If you read this letter, it means that I have, with high probability, joined your mother. Bear in mind that I have not died in vain and that I spent my last moments thinking about you.
>
> It is my sincerest hope that my death has come when the Germans have already been defeated, and that when you read these words the war is already over.
>
> Remember me well,
>
> Shawn McGregor

> Dear mother,
>
> Although you have always taught me to love my neighbour, this confused world praises me for being a sinner. I have become a murderer, yet I am being called a hero. I do not know whether I even deserve to live in this hell, but I command myself into the hands of our Lord and I trust this is just one of His trials. I hope he forgives me what I have done. Let father George please hold a mass for me. Give my accordion to my brother Mišo and tell my sister Amálka she can keep the silk parachute. They should not quarrel again.
>
> Trusting in God and hoping to meet you again in His better world, I give you my goodbye.
>
> I love you,
>
> your son Jan

The German always hides in the sun.

Don't shoot until you see the whites of his eyes!

Never chase a plane you have hit or his fellow will take you down.

Be satisfied with a probable kill, don't get yourself killed by Jerries while trying to confirm it.

You will be killed by the one you haven't seen.

Don't think about your blonde.

If you don't spot a Messer in time and he gets your friend, you are a criminal!

Radio silence. Keep the frequency free.

If you crash behind enemy lines, fight your way back.

If you get captured after all, keep your mouth shut.

Pierre Clostermann: The Big Show

The Resolution

Actions (whether in the skies or on the ground) are resolved by rolling three six-sided dice. Add up all the dice together and add the skill value. Then compare the result with a **target number**. In some cases the number is provided by these rules, in others it will be decided by the GM according to the player's action or intent. Even the numbers listed in these rules can change under various circumstances. It is of course more difficult when the pilot flies in a fog and rain than during a bright day. The target number set by the GM will be higher in this case.

The Debt

If the pilot fails a roll, he can tap his reserves and exhaust himself. This allows him to re-roll the dice (keep the second roll), but also incurs a debt on the skill. The player gets a –1 penalty for each **debt** whenever using this skill. The debt applies immediately after the roll that incurred it. You can only take one debt per roll but the number of debts per mission is not limited. However, each subsequent debt only spins the vicious circle further – the more debts a pilot has, the more debts he needs to take to avoid failing. A debt stays with the pilot until it is removed by succeeding in a conflict while at the Base; see the Base section below.

If the pilot keeps pushing his limits, his reaction time worsens and his focus dwindles. He flights absent-mindedly and becomes an easier prey for the enemy aircraft. He cannot keep his eyes closed, his sleep keeps getting interrupted by nightmares. He flights with bags under his eyes, jittery and tired. Not even higher doses of Benzedrine help any more, and the moment his luck runs off is getting ever closer.

The Photo

GM, ask each player to bring a picture of a girl that his character keeps pinned up in his cockpit or stuck into his wallet. It does not necessarily need to be his girlfriend (but if he has one, it should); it can also be a photo of a "hot" 1930s film star like Greta Garbo or Lilian Gish.

(You can find some amazing pictures at this website:
http://www.doctormacro.com/Galleries.htm.)

Players can use the photo once per mission. Looking at the photo gives the pilot a boost, reminds him the reason for risking his life in an aluminium coffin thousands of feet above the ground, and also allows him to use 4 dice for the next roll instead of the usual 3. The photo can be used this way only once. It has no effect in terms of game mechanics after it has been used once. You need to win in a personal conflict related to the relationship to replenish its use – by overcoming a relationship crisis, by directly saving the girl during a raid, by competing with another suitor etc. Alternatively, you can just get a new picture of a different girl or cut it out from a magazine.

2.

the mission

Even though large tracts of Europe and many old and famous States have fallen or may fall into the grip of the Gestapo and all the odious apparatus of Nazi rule, we shall not flag or fail. We shall go on to the end, we shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our Island, whatever the cost may be, we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender, and even if, which I do not for a moment believe, this Island or a large part of it were subjugated and starving, then our Empire beyond the seas, armed and guarded by the British Fleet, would carry on the struggle, until, in God's good time, the New World, with all its power and might, steps forth to the rescue and the liberation of the old.

Winston Churchill, 4 June 1940

The Course of a Dogfight

When pilots get into a dogfight, resolve it using the following combat system. Combat happens in rounds – one round beings a period of time long just enough for each pilot to attempt one action.

Actions

Pilots can choose from several actions during the fight. Their meaning and resolution are explained below.

There is no point trying to track the exact positions of each aircraft engaged in the battle, since these would change in a second anyway. A dogfight is a mad whirl with individual planes swarming in a frenzied rhythm, shooting all around, avoiding and escaping each other. It is impossible to keep track of the general situation and the position of every single plane under these circumstances. To keep things simple pilots can perform actions against any enemy aircraft.

Actions are announced and performed for each side (the RAF, the Luftwaffe) in turns. The attacking side goes first. (If this is an engagement where you cannot determine the attacker, let the commander of each side roll 3 dice. The one with the highest total takes the first turn.) So for example if British interceptors manage to keep the sun in their backs and ambush the Germans, the RAF pilots announce and resolve their actions first, and all Luftwaffe pilots second. There is no strict order for the pilots on one side to act. Let the players themselves decide, ideally while taking into account the chain of command.

Once all pilots from both sides have performed their actions, the turn ends and another one begins. The process is the same. Keep taking turns until all aircrafts from one side are destroyed or have flown away from the battlefield.

You can perform the following actions in a dogfight:

Shooting

The pilot can aim at a target and shoot at it from weapons installed on his aircraft. You can shoot during a fly-by but the chance to hit this way is very small. It is better to tail the opponent first to obtain a better shooting position, see below.

The pilot rolls his Shooting skill to hit another aircraft and needs to roll higher than the **target number of 16**. He needs to strike off one point of Ammunition whether he succeeds or fails, see below for more details.

If a pilot rolls three 1s during a shooting roll, his weapons have jammed and are useless from now on. It is impossible to fire them until the return to the base.

Tailing an Enemy

The pilot can attempt to fly behind the enemy's tail and get him into his cross-hairs to improve his chances to hit. The pilot rolls his Piloting skill against the opponent's Piloting to determine whether the tailing attempt has succeeded.

If successful, the pilot locks onto the enemy's tails and gets +5 bonus to Shooting in the following turns.

If unsuccessful, it means the enemy has manoeuvred well enough to keep his back clean, and the attacker could not keep behind him.

Chasing an Enemy Off

If the pilot is being tailed, he might decide to shake the enemy off by swift manoeuvring. Roll the pilot's Piloting against the attacker's Piloting. Success means the attacker has been shaken off (and therefore cannot use the +5 bonus for subsequent shooting). Failure means the attacker managed to keep behind and can use the Shooting bonus.

The Wingman

The pilot might decide to stay with a friendly plane, follow it, copy its moves and generally help it. He provides cover for the other plane so that enemies attempting to tail the leading plane have to manoeuvre against two planes instead of just one. If the pilot has a wingman (another pilot who performed the Wingman action) and starts tailing an enemy, he gets +3 bonus for Shooting. If, on the contrary, a pilot starts tailing a plane that has a wingman of its own,

his Shooting is decreased by 3 (so the tailing bonus becomes just +2 instead of +5), because he needs to keep track of two planes instead of one.

An interceptor or a fighter can have one wingman, a bomber can be followed by two planes performing the Wingman action. Wingmen of course cannot provide a Shooting bonus to a bomber, they simply just decrease the Shooting bonus of any tailing attackers (the effects stack, meaning two wingman would reduce the bonus by 6, i.e. to −1). This way two interceptors can safely escort a damaged bomber back home.

Gaining Altitude

Altitude is useful in combat because the pilot can transform it into speed at any time to get an advantage. The player gets an altitude token which he can later use with any action for each turn of gaining altitude. Using a token adds a +2 bonus to the action and the token is returned back to the pool. You can use as many tokens as you want per turn (and use the sum of their bonuses).

If the pilot is serving as a wingman of a plane that is gaining altitude, he also gets an altitude token (as if he performed this action himself). Likewise, if the pilot is locked onto a tail of an opponent who is gaining altitude, he also gets an altitude token because he stays closely behind.

Escaping Combat

When an aircraft is damaged, out of ammo or about to lose the battle, the pilot will in all likelihood attempt to safe his neck and an expensive machine instead of losing both in a futile fight.

The pilot gets an escape token for each turn spent escaping. The token is awarded automatically, however the pilot cannot perform any other action. Once he accumulates three tokens, he has gained a sufficient lead and enemies can no longer threaten him. The plane leaves the battle.

The Pursuit

The pilot can also spend his action to pursue a fleeing enemy (a plane with some escape tokens). Roll his Piloting skills against the escapee's Piloting. If successful, he manages to get closer to the fleeing plane – discard one of its escape tokens (return it to the pool).

The Immelmann

If the pilot succeeds in a Piloting roll against the **target number of 16**, he performs the Immelmann Turn and shakes off any enemies locked onto his tail. However, by doing this he also turns to face the enemy and can fire one fly-by burst against him (basic fire, no bonuses).

Firing Pass

The pilot who has accumulated three altitude tokens can perform a quick attack pass while blasting all weapons. He strikes off 2 points of ammo (see the Ammunition below) but gains a +6 bonus to his Shooting skill. Return the altitude tokens back to the pool. You can either use the bonus against a single opponent (+6 bonus) or against the two separate opponents (dividing the bonus to +3 and +3).

Pawns as Visual Representation

If a player has locked onto an enemy's tail, signify this by moving his pawn behind the enemy's. Do the same the other way around when an enemy starts tailing a British plane. To represent the Wingman action, again simply move one plane behind the other. If somebody is trying to flee the battlefield, move their pawn aside from the others and put an escape token next to it. There is no need to represent any other actions.

The Planes

Both RAF and Germans had already been using monoplanes almost exclusively by the time of the Battle of Britain. These had a metal fuselage, with the wings and the hull covered by canvas or duralumin sheets. The armament consisted of machine guns or cannons mounted in the wings or in the axis of the propeller. The enclosed cockpits tended to be armoured and equipped with an oxygen-breathing apparatus, so that the pilots could fly in high altitudes. Each plane also had a radio, and was guided to the target by a radio operator according to the radar readings. Otherwise the pilots navigated using a compass and aerial maps.

Interceptors

The bulk of the British interceptor force consisted of **Hawker Hurricane Mk I** and the less numerous, albeit more powerful **Spitfire Mk I**. The German Jagdwaffe (Fighter Force) used predominantly **Messerschmitt Bf 109E**.

Airplane Damage

When a plane is hit by fire (i.e. when the opponent succeeds in a Shooting roll against the plane), it gets damaged. A damaged plane suffers a –5 penalty to both Piloting and Shooting. Once the battle is over, the pilot must succeed in a Piloting roll against 8 (subtract the penalty) or he will crash during the landing attempt. In that case he needs to roll a six sided die to see if he survives – a roll of 1 or 2 means the pilot dies.

When a plane is hit for the second time, it is immediately shot down. The pilot must roll a six sided die to see if he survives – rolling 4, 5 or 6 means he manages to escape alive with a parachute. Any other roll means he has been directly killed by fire, has been wounded and is unable to jump out, has burned alive stuck in the cockpit or that his parachute did not open.

If shot above sea, inhospitable tundra or e.g. a desert, the pilot survives only on a roll of 5 or 6. This is because he needs to wait to be rescued by lifeboats, a long-ranged patrol etc.

Shot Down Above Enemy Territory

Even when the pilot gets shot down above enemy territory, he survives on a roll of 4, 5 or 6 normally. Then, however, he lands behind enemy lines and has two options. Either he surrenders himself and the fight is over for him. He spends the rest of the war in a prisoner camp and the player needs to create a new character, same as if the pilot has died.

Or, the pilot can attempt to escape the occupied territory and rejoin allied forces (by contacting the local resistance groups, sneaking into Netherlands and stealing a boat, making away with an aircraft from a German airfield, or perhaps crossing the mountains to Spain or Switzerland). The player needs to come up with a place

of escape, describe it and finally play out 2 conflicts with the GM (during the Base phase) which represent the key moments of his plan. These conflicts typically use the Soldiering skill. Unless the pilot succeeds in both of them, he gets captured (or shot while on the run). If he does succeed, he manages to return home and can return once more unto the breach. Moreover, he receives a promotion for escaping enemy territory.

Attacking Ground Targets

Interceptors may also be sent to destroy specific ground targets (radar stations, fuel depots, bridges, planes on ground or aboard ships, surfaced submarines, V1 missile launch devices later in war, etc.).

A different set of actions is used for attacking ground targets than for air combat. Attack itself takes two turns – in first turn interceptor approaches the target and in second it hits it and takes off to safety. The pilot can choose from two actions for approach: Straight Approach or Evasive Approach. Straight Approach means that plane goes straight down to the target and makes no evasive actions to get rid off anti-aircraft (AA) fire. It has better chance to hit the target, because pilot focuses on it and goes right for it (in second turn has the pilot bonus +5 to hit the target), but it also puts itself in danger of being hit by anti-aircraft fire (it has bonus +2 to hit in both turns of attack). If pilot chooses Evasive Approach, his plane makes evasive manoeuvres, turns and often changes course to evade AA fire from below. There are no bonuses or penalties. After approaching follows attack itself.

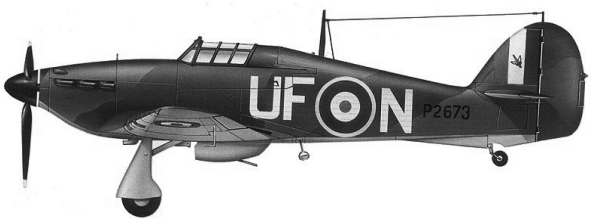
Player rolls the Shooting skill against the target number of 16. Pilot can attack the target by cannons (sufficient to destroy grounded planes, automobiles, trains, or enemy soldiers, but not armoured targets), or by a bomb mounted under the fuselage (the bomb gives −3 to Piloting while present). Target can be protected by anti-aircraft weapons. AA-gun or machine-gun in range can shoot at the incoming plane every turn, same as when tail-gunners of bombers defend their plane (see below).

Ammunition

Each aircraft carries only a limited supply of ammunition on board, measured in points (e.g. a Spitfire can load 10 points of ammo). Each shot decreases ammunition by one point, and the "Firing Pass" action decreases it by two.

If the aircraft carries any special ammunition, bombs or missiles, these are tracked in points as well, and the player needs to subtract these after each shot as usual. If the plane drops all of its bombs, the player naturally marks all of them off.

Aeroplanes:



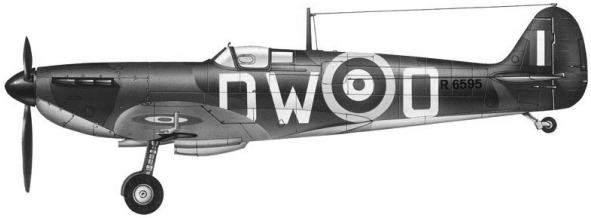
Hurricane Mk I (RAF)

The most widespread interceptor in the Battle of Britain is an older, though a reliable plane. By the end of the battle, it has gradually been losing pace with its opponents, and first-line units were switching to Spitfires instead.

Special rules:

The plane has 16 points of ammunition; it carries more ammo than a Spitfire.

It gets +1 to basic Shooting (i.e. when not tailing an opponent); the effect of its eight machine guns.



Spitfire Mk I (RAF)

The best RAF plane in the Battle of Britain boasts good manoeuvrability, quickness and a great turning ability. All interceptor wings gradually switched to this craft.

Special rules:

The plane has 10 points of ammunition; being lighter, it carries fewer ammo.

It gets +1 bonus to Piloting when trying to tail an opponent or shake him off; this is thanks to the aforementioned manoeuvrability and great turns.

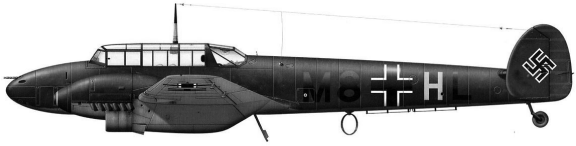
Messerschmitt Bf 109E (Luftwaffe)

The most common interceptor of the Luftwaffe. All except two of the German aces flew this aircraft. It was mass produced, had a very good ability to climb, but also a couple of devious features that required the hand of an experienced pilot.

Special rules:

The aircraft has 8 points of machine-gun ammunition.

Aside of machine-guns, Messerchmitts also have three cannons, one mounted in the centre of the propeller and two on the wings. These cause 2 damage instead of the typical 1, meaning they shoot down an interceptor in a single hit. The aircraft carries 3 points of cannon ammunition and can shoot them only when tailing an opponent. (It can shoot the machine guns at any time.)



Messerschmitt Bf 110C (Luftwaffe)

The heavy fighter – "Zerstörer" (literally a "destroyer") was supposed to serve as a bomber escort while also carrying bombs, but has proved to be vulnerable. It served as a fast bomber that needed escorts of its own later on.

Special rules:

The aircraft carries 8 points of machine-gun ammunition.

It has two heavy cannons (see Bf 109E) with 4 points of ammunition.

It has a tail machine gun that can shoot (no bonuses) at anyone who targets an action against the aircraft.

It gets a −4 penalty to Piloting when performing actions, being heavy and difficult to handle.

The Bombers

Pilots may also encounter bombers in the skies, particularly the German **Heinkel He 111** or the faster **Junkers Ju 88**. British bombers are represented mainly by the ageing **Armstrong Whitworth Whitley**, intended for night raids.

Special Rules

The massive bomber planes differ from interceptors in their considerably worse manoeuvrability – they get a basic −3 penalty to Piloting which further increases by −4 if the plane is loaded with bombs. This additional penalty is lost after dropping the bombs (one action).

They are also armed with several machine guns, providing coverage of most angles around the plane, including the rear. Each bomber can shoot two bursts of machine-gun fire per a single whole round (which consists of the RAF turn and the Luftwaffe turn). If an enemy pilot performs an action which targets a bomber (shooting, tailing, performing a firing pass), it is assumed that he had to approach it closely. The GM may decide that the gunners will shoot at the incoming aircraft, using one of their two bursts (this is a basic Shooting roll with no bonuses). The shooting occurs simultaneously with the interceptor's action. If the bomber still has any bursts left when it is its turn to take an action, it may use these to shoot at any aircraft that is tailing it (it is possible to shoot at a single aircraft for the second time). Otherwise, these burst are "lost" (unused). To hit a passing interceptor from a loosely mounted machine gun is difficult, and most gunners will instead try to create a curtain of fire to discourage enemy from attacking.

If the gunners are shooting at an aircraft that is tailing their bomber, their work is much easier. The aircraft is close and has only a limited ability to manoeuvre because it needs to keep the bomber in its cross-hairs. The gunners get a +2 bonus to Shooting.

Bomber pilots use the same values of the Piloting skill as interceptor pilots (2–6). Bomber gunners have a Shooting skill of 1 or 2 only.

Damage to Bombers

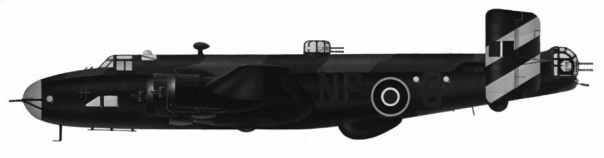
Bombers are sturdier than interceptors and therefore require to be hit twice to get damaged, and another two hits to be shot down (4 hits in total). The actual effects of damage or being shot down remain unchanged.

The Ammunition

There is no need to keep track of the machine-gun ammunition aboard bombers because they can carry large supplies. It is assumed that a bomber will not run out of ammunition in a typical fight (exceptional situations may be house-ruled by the GM individually).

Bombers also carry a specific amount of bombs which they can drop to increase their manoeuvrability.

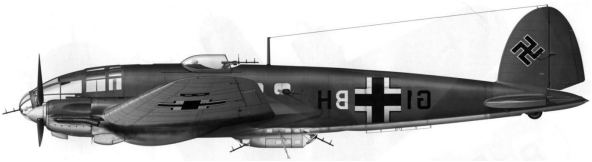
Aeroplanes:



Armstrong Whitworth Whitley (RAF)

This had already been an outdated aircraft by the time of the Battle of Britain, and as such was mainly used for night raids.

It has no special rules.



Heinkel He 111 (Luftwaffe)

A heavy, slower bomber with a big carrying capacity, endurance, and weaponry.

Special rules:

The aircraft can suffer 3 points of damage instead of the usual 2; it is a very hardy craft.

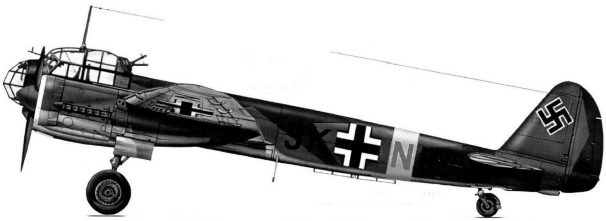
If the enemy rolls three sixes on a Shooting roll against this aircraft (basic fire, no tailing), the bomber is immediately shot down. The Heinkel has a large, glass-covered cockpit which, useful as it may be for piloting and aiming, is vulnerable to machine-gun fire.

Junkers Ju 88 (Luftwaffe)

A fast bomber that almost rivals the speed of a Hurricane when not carrying bombs. It is, however, inadequately armed.

Special rules:

When attempting to escape combat, the plane does not receive the usual bomber –3 penalty to Piloting; this is due to its aforementioned speed.



The Enemy

The opponents of the British RAF in the Battle of Britain are the pilots of the German Luftwaffe. These can be divided into three categories, based on their skills:

Rookies

These pilots have barely finished their basic training, and still have not proven themselves in combat. They have been sent into action to replace the losses from the Battle of France, but their skills are hardly spectacular.

Piloting: 2

Shooting: 1

Veterans

Veterans have participated in at least one campaign, have returned from many flights and they might even have scored a couple of kills. They are cool-headed, dangerous opponents.

Piloting: 3

Shooting: 2

Aces

Rugged old sweats of the Spanish civil war, Polish campaign and the fights above France, these are veterans of dozens of dogfights. They know all the tricks in the book, have a perfect understanding of their planes and cannot be surprised by anything. Often they will have 15 to 20 kills under their belts.

Piloting: 6

Shooting: 5

The Mission

The missions the pilots are sent to are chosen by the GM. Once a mission has been finished and all scenes of the Base phase have been played (see below), the GM chooses a new mission. In a special case when the danger has not passed yet or when the Germans start a large-scale offensive, the GM may opt for having the pilots start two missions in row (thus skipping the Base phase). This puts enormous stress on the pilots and the GM should not do this too often.

Some of the common types of aerial missions are:

The Sweep

Cleaning the airspace from enemy aircraft.

The sweep is perhaps the most common mission. The goal is to prevent the enemy from bombing the English cities or the RAF air bases. The pilots will face bomber planes accompanied by interceptor escorts, which will try to distract their opponents from the bombers by entering the combat.

The fights happen over the southern England. The German planes might already be approaching their target and the pilots have only a limited time to stop them. Set the number of turns after which the bombers will drop their load.

If the radar detects the bombers still flying above the Channel, pilots may have about 15 turns to shoot them down. If the bombers have been detected on the shores already, the number of turns drops to 10. And if they have managed to slip over the actual English soil, the time runs off in 5 turns (making the interception very difficult). Bombers may also be attacking the pilots' home base directly, with the pilots scrambling their aircrafts under fire. Only one aircraft per turn can take off under such circumstances, and if the bombers manage to get over the airfield, other aircraft will have to take off in midst of dropping bombs and explosions.

The Channel stop

An air operation with the task to stop enemy aircrafts that are crossing the Channel. The combat happens over the Channel itself (where shot-down pilots need to be rescued by lifeboats, dropping their chances for saving their life to a roll of 5 or 6 only) or, if they have not been stopped in time, over the Southern England.

The Rodeo

A sweep over the enemy territory. If the pilot is shot down, read the section "Shot Down Above Enemy Territory" above.

The Circus

A bombing run accompanied by a large interceptor escort, with the goal to lure enemy interceptors into combat, and to destroy ground targets. The runs happen during the day and are focused on near targets. The intent is to draw enemy interceptors away and keep them occupied in the area.

Here, above northern Germany or France, the situation turns around and both sides swap their parts. RAF pilots need to defend their bombers against German interceptors who are trying to shoot them down.

The Mandolin

An operation with the goal to destroy enemy railway infrastructure (rail stations, engines and rolling stock, tracks, depots, marshalling yards, workshops etc.).

Rhubarb

A flight in heavy clouds or low visibility when a group of interceptors cross to the French side of the Channel. There they drop below the clouds and attempt to destroy targets of opportunity, hunt airborne enemy aircrafts over the occupied territory, destroy the valuable ground targets (like rail engines, marshalling yards, grounded planes, enemy soldiers, road vehicles...), and generally disturb the enemy.

The Ranger

Free flights over enemy territory, performed either by a pair of interceptors or a whole flight, with the goal to keep the enemy occupied and tire out enemy interceptors.

The Roadstead

Dive attacks and raids just above the sea level against enemy ships either at the sea or anchored in port.

BURLINGTON ARCADE

3.

the base

"For us, the war wasn't disorderly run of thousands and thousands of people, desperate of fear, with bayonettes fixed on rifles, thousands of people who chase one another and support each other in an anonymous massacre forced on them.

For us, the war was a personal, voluntary, predictable, almost scientifically calculated act of sacrifice, it was a disgusting talon of fear, which you had to drive into your body, it was a will – and you felt, how it slips away every day in a bitter waves, and you knew that you need to keep it and fight for it every day.

It had to be done once, twice, ten times, hundred times, three hundred times, and you had to return into normal life after every operation: harsh mode of Finnish sauna! You jumped out of a plane and met normal people, people of flesh and blood, who go for a walk, make love, go to the movies, drinks in calm pubs, listen to the radio, smoke a pipe, read a book – and don't even think about not being alive tomorrow!"

Pierre Clostermann: The Big Show

The pilots lead their lives on airbases or go on leaves to bombed towns during the lulls between the missions. It is very likely the pilots will be stationed in the vicinity of London (see Campaign), and they can easily make bicycle trips to the capital.

Many pilots have their families or girlfriends near the base (or they might date one of the WAAF girls at the base), visit pubs or dance halls where they may encounter misunderstandings from the locals, or perhaps go to a hospital to see a wounded friend. Each scramble could be their last one, friends keep dying left and right, and the nerves are tense. And so the pilots try to at least enjoy their life a bit before the Reaper grabs it and they burn alive in the cockpit or smash against the ground.

Each pilot is entitled to have one personal scene between each two missions that explores his life outside the cockpit. The specific scene is the player's own choice – he gets to say what the scene is about, but of course only after consulting with the GM. Other pilots may (and often should) participate in the scene, develop the story and steer the scene towards the conflict. Each personal scene should contain a conflict which is then resolved by a roll.

Success in the conflict means the pilot can cancel one of his Debt points (he gets to choose which one). The target number to roll depends on the difficulty or riskiness of what the pilot is attempting to do. It is set by the GM after consulting the players. Easy conflicts (or conflict with low stakes) should use a target number of about 8–10, average ones 10–12, and severe conflicts 12–16 (in such case, the players may agree to cancel up to two points of Debt). Success and failure of the roll has more than a mechanical effect (deleting a point of Debt) though – it should also influence the narrative. Agree on the stakes beforehand and then play it out.

In other words, successes in life on the ground help the pilots to rest, relax their nerves a bit and fortify their resolve. The players get to develop personal stories of their characters and experience their life between missions. As mentioned, the choice of personal scenes depends to a large extent on the player, and probably arises from the pilot's personality.

For example, if the pilot is a fop who charms a different girl every evening... then most of his scenes will revolve around conquering a woman's heart, sneaking her into the base so they can enjoy their first kiss in the cockpit of his plane, trying to acquire some nylons for her, fighting complications that result from actually falling in love, making arrangements when the girl gets pregnant etc.

If the pilot is a Great War veteran who proudly serves his country and has a wife and three kids living in a little house 20 miles from the base, whom he needs to leave when he goes to battles... then most of his personal conflicts will elaborate upon his trouble with the wife, who keeps praying for his safe return but has no strength left to endure the terror of waiting whether he will manage to attend his own son's birthday. And what if German bombs hit the house – will he rescue his loved ones from the rubble?

The GM and the other players are free to suggest improvements of a scene or give recommendations on conflicts. This can for example lead to a scene where a routine date ends up with the pair huddling together in a bunker while bombers roam above their heads; a visit to the parent's house may turn into a nightmare where the pilot strives to rescue family members buried under debris; an unexpected sighting of German aeroplanes may result in a frantic bicycle ride through the night in an effort to reach the base and take off in time, etc. The Base phase of the game can also explore typical, everyday trouble (misunderstandings with parents, relationship or marriage woes, crises of faith...) in the extreme environment of war-torn England. Frequent bombing raids, curfew, food rationing and a lack of common supplies (like when women paint their lips red with a beetroot because lipsticks are a rare sight) change the nature of otherwise common situations.

Here are some examples of personal scenes to inspire you:

The Pub crawl

Conflicts: a brawl with sailors, a chase with military police that ends up in stealing bikes and making off for the base, a raid and the subsequent flight to a bunker through the burning streets.

The Dance

Conflicts: getting a girl's affections, exchanging the blows with another man, the sound of sirens that necessitates an immediate return to the base, hiding a girl from a commander who passes by so he does not know the pilot has taken her to his plane.

Visiting parents, a brother, a girlfriend, a lover...

Conflicts: the pilots finds just a ruined house and needs to find them, a fight arises during the dinner – will they make up?, getting caught by the lover's husband, helping to rescue victims after a recent raid and fighting fires in the middle of a night.

The Police

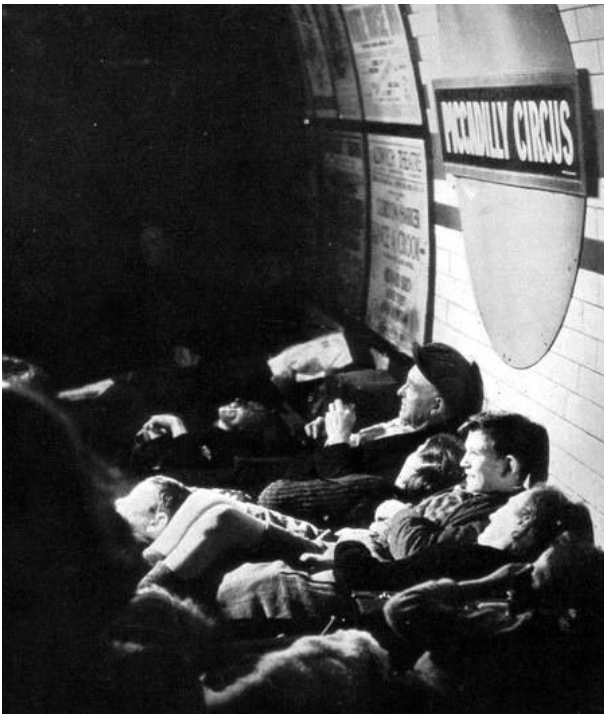
Conflicts: the police comes to arrest one of the pilots for murder – his girlfriend has been found dead and the police thinks it is his doing, the police seeks cooperation in the case of petrol vanishing from the base, one of the pilots has crashed because of a suspected engine sabotage – but who is responsible?

Military matters

Conflicts: an epic battle with bureaucracy to ensure enough spare parts for the squadron, trying to dismiss irrational orders that would only cost someone's life, a court martial for disobeying or because of a superior's hatred towards the pilot.

Shot down

Conflicts: the pilot tries to return to his base.



4.

the campaign

„Soldier in a field lives a tough life, but he lives in the same conditions, same environment, constantly. He slowly adapts, falls numb, gets used to it. But you return into normal life every day. You go to the movies, get a few beers and have a chat with friends in a pub, occasionally make love, or just sit at home by the window, lookat the sky and talk to the stars. You live a normal life for a few hours, just to fly off into unreal, savage world of terror and fear and tension every morning. Maybe this constant swappping of two different worlds makes you die from inside, your soul gets empty, the fine network of nerves is slowly torn apart, every following morning you go there almost against your will. You return there, but you lose something every day, it is harder to get back every morning. You gather your will to fight against it, and worry more and more every day, that a moment comes once when you fail to return..."

Antonín Liška

This chapter discusses how the game evolves after both the Mission and the Base phases have been played. A "campaign" is a long series of military engagements in which the pilots take part, in this case the Battle of Britain. Over the course of the campaign, pilots get promoted, or die and get replaced by new ones. The following pages describe how a long-term play works.

The game consists of alternating Mission and Base phases. Usually they follow each other (one Mission, one Base, one Mission etc.), though it is possible that the pilots may be required to attend a couple of missions in row without having the luxury to rest (thus skipping the Base phase).

Playing the Campaign

The game begins in the Base phase during which the green pilots, freshly assigned to the squadron as replacements, try to navigate London under enemy raid. The purpose of the scene is to illustrate the necessity to fight and stop the German bombers. The red double-decker bus that is taking the pilots through the city stops, sirens ring from all sides, and people, disturbed from their everyday lives, hurry into bunkers in confusion. In a couple of moments, all hell breaks loose, buildings collapse under explosions and streets burn in flames. After the sound of German engines fades off and the sirens stop, the only sounds are the screams of the wounded and cries of those who have lost their loved ones. What will the pilots do? Will they try to get into cover? Will they try to save the girl who stopped in the middle of the street, crying? Will they help to find survivors in the rubble that might contain unexploded bombs? Will they help fire fighters to quench the fires? Will they carry wounded and dead alongside emergency workers? Although the pilots cannot cancel a point of Debt for now (this being just a story scene), they can get harmed or even die due to a failed roll. On the other hand, success may mean they manage to save someone's life. This is an opportunity to create some contacts which will be of use later, or perhaps safe a wounded girl whom they will later visit in a hospital.

Afterwards, the Mission and Base phases alternate normally.

The pilots join a squadron equipped, just like most interceptor units during the Battle of Britain, by Hurricane Mk. I planes. The squadron may be rearmed with the newer Spitfire Mk. Is. after a couple of missions. This happens depending on the player's successes – better squadrons have the priority for newer equipment. The commanding pilot may roll his Soldiering skill against the target number of 12 after the fifth mission. This represents doing the paperwork and obtaining priority for his squadron. He gets a +1 bonus for each 5 enemies that the squadron has shot down. If successful, the squadron receives Spitfires in time for the next mission. If not, other squadrons get priority and the player may roll again after the next mission. Subtract 1 from the target number for each mission after the first one (so it is 11 after the second, 10 after the third etc.)

Skill Improvement

If they are successful in missions, the player pilots get to improve their skills and acquire higher ranks. The British air force uses the following rank hierarchy:

> Sergeant (Sgt.) → Flight Sergeant (F. Sgt.) → Warrant Officer (W/O) → Pilot Officer (P/O) → Flying Officer (F/O) → Flight Lieutenant (F/L) → Squadron Leader (S/L) → Wing Commander (W/C)

As already mentioned in the Pilot chapter, all pilots start with the rank of a Sergeant, with the exception of the commander who enters play with the rank of a Flight Sergeant. For each two enemy aircraft shot down, a pilot receives a promotion after his return to the base. For every damage dealt to interceptor, pilot can count ½ of aircraft shot down (so 1 aircraft shot down for one interceptor); for every 2 damage dealt to bomber, pilot can also count ½ of aircraft shot down. This allows him to add one point to any one of his skills. If you are creating a new pilot of a higher rank (see below), divide 8 basic point between the skills (these are equal to what a Sgt. gets: 3, 2, 2, and 1), and then add 1 additional point for each rank above the first one (for example, Flight Lieutenants get 8 basic points and then 4 additional ones).

From the Flight Lieutenant rank and on, the pilot can ask to be accompanied by another aeroplane during missions. The plane will follow him and be his wingman (it will only play the "wingman" actions during combat).

After 5 victories (i.e. 5 enemies shot down), the pilot attains the status of an ace and receives a Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC). At 10 shot-downs, he receives a bar to the DFC. Squadron or wing commanders can also receive the Distinguished Service Order (DSO) after scoring 20 kills.

Pilot Death

The gradual death spiral of exhaustion and the lack of sleep (where the pilots fly in Debt and extend themselves too much), combined with the terrific danger of the missions means that only few pilots will survive till the end of the war. Pilots, even those controlled by the player, die. Such is the war.

The game does not end with the death of a pilot, though. The dead are shortly replaced by newcomers who take their place in the squadron. The player creates

a new pilot character and continues the game with him. The new pilot will be less experienced than the old one – his rank will be one lower (and he will receive the corresponding number of skill points). If dead pilot had a rank of Sergeant, than his replacement will also have a rank Sergeant.

Example: If a player's pilot, who died after being shot down above France, had the rank of a Warrant Officer (W/O), then his replacement (the player's new character) will have the rank of a Flight Sergeant (F. Sgt.). This mean he gets to divide 8 basic skill points and 1 additional one.

The stories of individual pilots, their combat experience and everyday endeavours, are all connected by their **flight**.

Flight Records

The players should keep records on their flight (including to which group, wing, squadron and flight the pilots belong). Let them mark down short notes (even just a single line) about each player pilot who served in the flight – his date of arrival, number of kills, date of death.

The Royal Air Force Hierarchy

The tactical air force consisted of groups, each lead by a Group Captain – G/C. There were four groups defending England during the Battle of Britain, where the No. 11 Group RAF was the one responsible for the defence of southeastern England, and therefore London. The player pilots all belong to the 11th group.

Each group was subdivided into wings, lead by Wing Commanders – W/C. The wings belonged to a specific air field, resulting in names like "the Uxbridge Wing" etc. The bases nearest to London which bore the weight of defending the capital were, for the most part, the three "combat" air fields of Kenley, Biggin Hill, and Croydon. The characters will probably be stationed at one of these.

Each wing had three or four squadrons, lead by Squadron Leaders – S/L. A squadron would have about 24 aeroplanes and 30–32 pilots. Along with the ground personnel (engineers, armament technicians, radio operators), this made around a hundred people.

Squadrons were further divided into two flights, named A and B. Each flight had 12 aeroplanes.

Each flight consisted of three sections, lead by the highest ranked officer, of 4 planes each. They were the Blue, Red and Yellow section. The player pilots will likely form one full section (4 players) or one reinforced or weakened section (depending on the number of players).

The players should also roughly outline the characters of higher ranks who will serve as their commanders. Having them prepared will be useful – for both inspiration and having some non-player characters ready – during the Base phase of the game.

Example: While creating their characters, the players agree they want to defend London, so that they can go into the capital during the Base phase and use it in their

personal scenes. Therefore they will belong to the No. 11 Group defending London, Kenley Wing, the No. 615 Squadron ("the Churchill's Own"), flying in Hurricane Mk Is. This is a real wing that operated from the Kenley base during the Battle of Britain, but feel free to break from the historical reality. You may choose a random squadron number and ignore the historical background. The players will be a part of the B flight, and constitute the Blue section.

Now the players need to create their superior officers. After a short deliberation, they decide that the flight will be under the command of F/L Nicholas McCroydon (a stubborn ginger Scotchman), the squadron under the command of S/L William T. Cook (a slightly snobbish member of the London elite), and the whole base under the command of W/C Jeremy Dawkins (a professional soldier an embodiment of a typical Englishman). This hierarchy is enough for the moment and the game can begin.

Further Play

When the Battle of Britain is over, the surviving pilots may continue in other battles. After all, they will still have to face four years of a cruel, incessant war. They will be sent to other battlegrounds and other military campaigns where they will go on fighting the Axis.

Perhaps they can fight Rommel's Afrikakorps in Northern Africa, scramble against the Japanese from the boards of carrier ships, continue the fight above Britain, support the Normandy invasion or flight the RAF colours in battles over France and, later, Germany. In the latter years of the war, the European skies will be host to more advanced aeroplanes, with the player pilots flying Tempests or the jet-engined Meteors, while their enemies will be the Me 626 jets or the long-nosed Focke Wulfs...

ending comments

I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears, and sweat.

Winston Churchill, 13 May 1940

The game was originally created for the Czech RPG Kitchen 2012 design contest where it was awarded the third place and an acknowledgement for the best-written rulebook. The design "ingredients" used were The Trooper, The Flight of Extraordinary Gentlemen, The Letter, and The Debt. This is an improved version of the original game.

The photographs of London in ruins have been sourced from www.fronta.cz (they are taken from the *Grim Glory* pictures published in 1941, and *The Bombed Buildings of Britain* published in 1942 originally). Photographs of aeroplanes are from various sources all over the Internet – the original authors are often impossible to find.

The Big Show is a book originally written in French by Pierre Clostermann. Although it has been published in English, we did not have the English translation on hand and therefore the quotes are our own translations. Apologies for their crudeness.

Special thanks goes to Jiří Petrů for translating this document into English and Jakub Maruš for layouting it and for priceless help he gave to this project.

Thanks goes to Crowen for proofreading and other help. Aljen, Anthaton, Maugir, and Zyt did an early playtest with us which motivated us to further work on the game. Also thanks to Aljen, Peekay and Pieta for valuable comments and their help in the creation of this game and guys from RPGForum.cz who test combat situations with us.

mission rules summary

Actions

Shooting: *Shooting skill against 16*

Tailing an opponent: *Piloting against Piloting,* +5 bonus to Shooting

Shaking an opponent off: *Piloting against Piloting,* tailing is cancelled

Wingman: +3 Shooting to the main aircraft if it shoots while tailing (+5 +3 = +8 in total), −3 Shooting to an enemy who attempts to shoot the main plane while tailing it (+5 −3 = +2 in total)

Gaining altitude: one token per turn, one-time +2 bonus to any action

Escaping combat: after accumulating 3 escape tokens, an aircraft may leave combat

Pursuing: *Piloting against Piloting,* cancels an escape token

The Immelman turn: *Piloting against 16,* shakes an opponent off and gives one shooting attempt against him

Firing Pass: *3 altitude tokens, 2 point of ammo;* +6 bonus to Shooting and 2 damage dealt, or +3 and +3 bonus to Shooting and 1 and 1 damage dealt

Interceptors

First point of damage: the plane is "damaged"; −5 to Piloting and Shooting; during landing attempt, a Piloting roll against 8 (subtract the penalty from the roll) – if unsuccessful, a roll of one die where the pilot dies on 1 or 2

Second point of damage: the plane is "shot down"; a roll of one die, the pilot is rescued on 4, 5 or 6 (just 5 or 6 above sea), and then he needs 2 successes in conflicts during the escape, otherwise he is killed or captured

Bombers

All bombers get −3 to Piloting, further −4 if loaded by bombs (−3 −4 = −7 in total). Two machine-gun bursts per round; they can shoot at planes that attempt an action against the bomber (immediate fire) or are tailing it (+2 bonus).

First point of damage: no mechanical effect

Second point of damage: the plane is "damaged"; −2 to Piloting and Shooting; during landing attempt, a Piloting roll against 10 (subtract the penalty from the roll) – if unsuccessful, a roll of one die where the pilot dies on 1 or 2

Third point of damage: no additional mechanical effect

Fourth point of damage: the plane is "shot down"; a roll of one die, the pilot is rescued on 4, 5 or 6 (just 5 or 6 above sea), and then he needs 2 successes in conflicts during the escape, otherwise he is killed or captured

Attacking Ground Targets

Made in two turns. 1. turn: **Straight Approach:** +5 to additional attack; +2 to hit for AA fire; or **Evasive Approach:** without bonuses or penalties

2. turn: **Attack:** Piloting (Mounted bomb) / Shooting (Machine guns) *roll against 16*